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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 005671

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PINR](#) [CO](#)

SUBJECT: LIBERALS SELECT GAVIRIA AS PARTY CHIEF;
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE TBD

REF: A. BOGOTA 5509

[B](#). BOGOTA 4571

[C](#). BOGOTA 3842

Classified By: Charge Milton K. Drucker, Reasons: 1.4 B & D.

[1](#). (C) Summary: On June 11, the Liberal Party (PLC) national convention selected former President and OAS SyG Cesar Gaviria as its national party head. Gaviria denounced President Uribe for abandoning and attacking the PLC, wrongheaded policies (most notably an alleged failure to control the peace process with paramilitaries), and incompetence (including a shot at the President's famous work ethic). Twice-unsuccessful Presidential candidate Horacio Serpa lost his bid for a group party leadership, but saw his social democratic platform ratified. The date and method of candidate selection for next May's presidential election remain open. Serpa is the front-runner for the PLC nomination at this point. Gaviria and Serpa are quietly talking to the two leftist parties -- Polo Democratico and Alternativa Democratica -- regarding a potential left/center-left alliance against Uribe. End Summary.

Gaviria Upstages Serpa with Attack on Uribe

[2](#). (C) Cesar Gaviria united delegates at the June 10-11 PLC national convention and upstaged two-time Presidential candidate and rival Horacio Serpa with a harsh attack on President Uribe. He criticized Uribe (a former prominent Liberal Party politician who abandoned the party to run for President) as a "messianic" political boss who had attacked the PLC as an institution and abandoned its principles. Gaviria accused Uribe of short-sightedness, micro-management at the expense of a wider vision, and for allowing the paramilitaries to have the upper hand in the peace process. His call for internal party unity and stepped-up attacks on Uribe closed ranks. In a brief conversation with Emboff on June 11, Gaviria continued his verbal assault on Uribe and questioned the USG's unwavering commitment to Uribe on all fronts, including the Justice and Peace legislation that Gaviria said clearly caved to the paramilitaries.

But Serpa Gets his Social-Democratic Platform

[3](#). (SBU) Not to be left behind, Serpa (Uribe's former Ambassador to the OAS) labeled Uribe as "neo-fascist." Serpa had earlier applauded, seemingly without irony, Gaviria's apparent change from neo-liberalism to social democracy. The PLC formally ratified Serpa's social democratic platform, which opposed neo-liberalism and favored: equitable distribution of income; protection of Colombian industry and agriculture; progressive taxation; defense of labor unions, the environment, and minorities; access for the poor to health care and education; reduction of unemployment; and a politically negotiated solution to Colombia's armed conflict. Not part of the platform, but much in evidence, was a call for a humanitarian exchange with the FARC; banners with pictures of kidnapped PLC members were prominently posted at the convention.

Penalosa Conserves his Options

[4](#). (SBU) Former Bogota mayor Enrique Penalosa opted out of the otherwise unanimous bashing of Uribe. Twenty-six percent of Liberals interviewed on June 8 favored Serpa as presidential candidate, with 18 percent for Penalosa. With 31 percent undecided, Penalosa (a "progressive-conservative" technocrat) is still a player. Penalosa thus left the door open for Uribe's support to run for President as a Liberal (if he can beat Serpa for the party's nomination) or as an independent, should the Constitutional Court rule out reelection.

Candidate Selection: How, When, and Who?

15. (C) Serpa urged early (i.e. by October) selection of a Presidential candidate, though he vacillated regarding the method. The convention did not set a date for the primary, which could take place as late as March 2006. Some pundits reckon that Serpa hopes first to win the nomination -- though he has yet to identify himself as a candidate -- and second to use it to wrest control of the party from Gaviria. Gaviria has denied any interest in running for the nomination, stating that the PLC presidency is a two-year, full-time job. In a conversation with Emboff on June 13, Polo Democratico (PDI) Party head Samuel Moreno said his party is quietly talking to Gaviria and Serpa regarding a potential left/center-left alliance between the PDI, the PLC, and Alternativa Democratica (AD).

Comment

16. (C) Gaviria, the most popular of the living former presidents, seems to be seeking to reduce Uribe's enviable public approval ratings, which stand at 70 percent. Gaviria's tactics (shrill personal attacks), however, will lead to fierce Uribe counter-attacks. At present, Uribe still is the clear front-runner for 2006, with or without a major opposition alliance arrayed against him. While important political actors appear to desire such an alliance, large egos, the tradition of the Liberal Party, ambitions of the Polo Democratico, and parochial interests may stand in the way.
DRUCKER